DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 436 005 CS 216 942

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TITLE An Effective Staff Development Plan To Encourage Writing in the Transition Classroom.

PUB DATE 1999-05-00
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Demonstration Programs; *Faculty Development; Grade 3; *High Risk Students; Longitudinal Studies; Primary Education; *Transitional Programs; Urban Schools; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Project Head Start

ABSTRACT

Third grade children from urban elementary schools in a southern city wrote, rewrote, and edited stories using strategies developed by their teachers during an interactive staff development program. They were participants in the National Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration Project, a longitudinal study of the transition experience of Head Start children and their families in public schools in 30 sites across the country. Two cohorts of Head Start children were followed from kindergarten through third grade, half in demonstration classrooms (all K-3 classrooms in three schools) and half in comparison classrooms (all K-3 classrooms in four schools). Schools were randomly selected as sites; children and families in the demonstration schools received "Head Start like" services (e.g., health care, social services, and family support), and all teachers received staff development and support in the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms. Training was designed to encourage classroom changes that would affect all children. The writing program includes reading, writing, spelling, and oral language and features a developmental continuum for each component. The continuum contains six phases from role play writing to advanced writing. Third-grade students wrote at least three times a week. Instruction was thematic using core books to integrate instruction in reading, writing, oral communication, and content areas. The extensive staff development and support for teachers in process writing, literature-based literacy instruction, developmentally appropriate organization and instruction, and individual assessment benefited the entire class. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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An Effective Staff Development Plan to Encourage Writing in the Transition Classroom

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May 1999

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Third grade children from urban elementary schools in a Southern city wrote, rewrote, and edited stories using strategies developed by their teachers during an interactive staff development program. They were participants in the National Head Start/Public School Transition Demonstration Project, a longitudinal study of the transition experience of Head Start children and their families in public schools in 30 sites across the country. The National Transition Project's Alabama site was a partnership between the Jefferson County Committee for Economic Opportunity (JCCEO) Head Start and the Birmingham Public Schools with Georgia State University as the evaluator. Each of the partners and parent representatives participated in planning and development meetings held at least three time each year. The JCCEO Head Start partner was responsible for the family support component of the project which included parent involvement in the schools. The Birmingham Public Schools partner was responsible for the staff development training and on-going support to classroom teachers. The Georgia State University partner was responsible for the overall evaluation and developed tracking systems for the project curriculum coordinator to use in her work with the classroom teachers.

The Transition Project followed two cohorts of Head Start children from kindergarten through third grade, half in Demonstration classrooms (all K-3

classrooms in three schools) and half in Comparison classrooms (all K-3 classrooms in four schools). The seven schools were randomly selected as Demonstration and Comparison sites. The children and families in the Demonstration schools received "Head Start like" services (e.g., health care, social services, and family support) and all teachers received staff development and support in the implementation of developmentally appropriate practices in their classrooms (Abbott-Shim, 1996; Kagan & Neuman, 1998; Seefeldt, Vartuli, & Jewett, 1998). The teachers were unaware which children in their classrooms were actually Transition Demonstration subjects. Training was designed to encourage classroom changes that would affect all children, both study and non-study.

Staff Development Program

When the Transition Project was initiated, the three partners explored ways to engage the teachers in instruction that would capitalize on developmental skills the children had acquired in Head Start, that would be meaningful in the context of these particular communities, and that would meet the instructional goals of the schools. A strong staff development program was considered key to the project's success. The focus was developmentally appropriate classroom practices supporting a meaningful reading and writing program across the curriculum.

Staff development activities were designed to be interactive and authentic by engaging the teachers in actual writing tasks with children. They were planned to be challenging and to allow teachers to demonstrate their newly acquired strategies and understanding during the staff development sessions and later in their classrooms. The simulations during the teacher workshops allowed teachers to practice and become comfortable with new ideas (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Skowron, 1998). Based on research for improving writing instruction through staff development (Pisano & Tallerico, 1990), the program was designed to meet three underlying assumptions: knowledge of the new content, trust in the resource person, and time to practice the new methodology in their classrooms (p. 18). This research also suggests that trainers should expect incremental rather than immediate progress (p. 20). Therefore, staff development was designed to be on-going over the four years. This contrasts greatly from the previous "expert-of-the month" presentation with no classroom follow-up and little effect on the instruction or learning (Schweinhart, Epstein, Okoloko, Oden, & Florian, 1998).

The program began with three days of staff development provided by the project curriculum coordinator and a consultant, followed by nine days of training scheduled throughout the school year. Substitutes were hired for all scheduled staff development days. The follow-up sessions were held in classrooms and

featured demonstrations with the children, highlighting their growth in writing over the year. In addition, the project curriculum coordinator visited each classroom at least twice per month, more as needed. The activities for these visits were individualized by teacher and included observation, modeling, and coaching. The project curriculum coordinator also met frequently with grade level teams at each Demonstration school for sharing and discussion. The emphasis was on individual students and their progress in both reading and writing. Teams of teachers and staff development personnel analyzed students' progress and discussed possible instructional strategies for them. An important aspect of the teachers' growth was their learning to model developmentally appropriate writing processes. All Demonstration teachers participated in the staff development and attended the regional Reading & Writing Conference each year. Teachers in the Comparison classrooms received the school system's regular allotment of books and supplies and could participate in any staff development offered by the school system, including a writing workshop.

Writing Program

The writing program was an adaptation of *First Steps* (1994). It includes reading, writing, spelling, and oral language and features a developmental continuum for each component. The continuum contains six phases from Role

Play Writing to Advanced Writing. Indicators for each phase provide clear, behavioral descriptors of the child's writing organized into categories (content, organization and contextual understandings; concepts and conventions; strategies; and attitude). This observational tool allows teachers to chart a student's individual growth and progress in each language arts area. It also provides suggestions for supporting their growth.

In the third grade, students wrote at least three times per week. Some teachers used a writing workshop format, others gave writing assignments using all aspects of the curriculum. In other grades, writing was a daily activity. Students took their "published" writing to the local Young Authors Conference.

Instruction was thematic using core books (fiction and non-fiction) to integrate instruction in reading, writing, oral communication, and content areas. Kindergarten and first grade teachers prepared 9-week thematic units with activities to develop literacy strategies such as concepts of print, story comprehension, phonemic awareness, prediction, and making sense of text. Second and third grade teachers analyzed their textbooks and state-mandated curriculum guides and regrouped them into 9-week topics which integrated reading, writing, and language with content disciplines.

High quality children's literature was the springboard for literacy activities,

Writing Assessment. In the third grade all children were given a writing assessment. They were all asked to respond to the prompt:

Think about a special time when you had lots of fun. Tell the story of what happened.

The task was administered to each classroom by the teacher and was untimed. The writing samples were scored by an independent measurement contractor in another state, using a process scoring guide developed by the Illinois State Board of Education (1994). These aspects of the child's writing were assessed:

Text-level Features

- Focus–the clarity with which a paper presents and maintains a clear main idea, point of view, theme, or unifying event.
- Support/Elaboration–the degree to which the main point or event is elaborated and explained by specific details and reasons.
- Organization–the clarity of the logical flow of ideas and the explicitness of the text structure or plan.

Sentence-level Feature.

- Conventions–use of standard written English.

Holistic Feature.

- Integration–evaluation of the paper based on a focused, global judgement of how effectively the paper as a whole uses basic features to address the topic.

Scoring was on a six-point scale:

1 - 3 indicates that the feature is absent or in the developing stages.

4 - 6 indicates that the feature is basically or well-developed.

including dramatizing, story re-telling, shared reading and writing, read alouds, and echo reading. To support this approach, all classrooms were stocked with a wide variety of books. Each classroom received an allotment for new books, two computers, and equipment to reconfigure their classrooms. In the third grade classrooms, rather than establishing classroom libraries as was done at the other grade levels, the teachers opted to set up a school resource room with books from a wide variety of

different genres, varying reading levels, and both single copies and sets of books.

Effects of the Staff Development Program

Both the quantity and the quality of the staff development program implemented by this partnership were factors in the third grade students' demonstrated writing development. Teachers understood the importance of process writing in the development of the child's literacy and acquired the instructional strategies to develop their writing.

The extensive staff development and support for teachers in process writing, literature-based literacy instruction, developmentally appropriate organization and instruction, and individual assessment benefitted the entire class. Key to the

Writing Results. All of the scale scores of the Transition Demonstration classroom students were significantly higher than those of the Comparison classroom students (p = .000). The mean Holistic and Text-level scores ranged from 2.7 to 3.5, the upper edge of the score range 1-3 which indicates that the children's writing is developing as expected. There were a few children whose compositions were judged to be well developed (score range 4-6). Even though the Demonstration group's Sentence-level scores were significantly higher than those of the Comparison group, the average score was level 1 (no child in either group scored above a 2). Neither group showed progress toward using standard English written conventions. This may be due to the emphasis teachers placed on writing as communication (process) with a de-emphasis on editing their writing. It is also, no doubt, a reflection of the children's oral English--their writing reflects their speaking.

success was the developmental continuum of writing which helped teachers to focus on individual children's progress. A quick check gave them a basis for encouraging, instructing, and engaging the child in an appropriate strategy. The more mature writing exhibited by children in the Transition classrooms was, no doubt, a cumulative effect of all the years of the project.

The fact that all children in the Transition schools demonstrated more effective writing strategies than the children in the comparison schools, regardless of whether they were study subjects or not, strongly supports the staff development focus on the teacher. These teachers were in a supportive context for change and were given consistent supervisory as well as material resources to effect the change, both ingredients for successful staff development (Pisano & Tallerico, 1990). Providing staff development to all teachers in the Transition schools created a grade-level context for change and allowed for peer support and coaching, other important ingredients for writing staff development (Weber, 1988; Johnston & Wilder, 1992).

Focus groups were held for the teachers to reflect on their staff development experiences. They specifically identified demonstration lessons, on-site staff development, continuing support throughout the year, supportive materials, and the expertise and experience of the trainers as factors in making the

staff development successful. These activities made them more aware of the needs of their students and more willing to collaborate with colleagues and were key to the actual implementation in their classrooms. While such staff development activities may require additional funding, they are not as expensive as providing services to individual children and families. The significant changes in these urban children's writing strategies reflect their classroom teachers' approach, attitude, and expertise gained in the staff development program. For a relatively modest sum, staff development can be provided to help teachers reorganize their classrooms to provide writing instruction that makes a difference.

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